

Robert “Bob” Dole Oral History Interview

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Interviewed by Kenneth Clarke, Present & CEO

C: Today I'm with Senator Bob Dole whose life of public service began when he enlisted in the army during World War II. We're going to talk about his service during the war with the 10th Mountain Division and what Senator Dole is doing today to perpetuate the legacy of those who served during the second world war fighting for freedom and democracy world wide.

Senator Dole, thank you very much for sitting down with me today. I appreciate your time with me today. We do oral histories at the museum and library, and I'm hoping that this can become an oral history that other people will watch and then also be inspired to actually talk about their military service. As you know veterans are not always very willing to talk about their service for many reasons-- dredges up old memories they'd rather not think about, it's not something they want to expose their families to. It's something they would just rather forget and leave behind and move on. But you're an example of somebody who's done the exact opposite of that, and I want to thank you for that. And I wouldn't mind if you would talk a little bit more about your time as a fresh second lieutenant coming out of officer candidate school and some of your memories as you moved from school into the 10th Mountain Division and started meeting up with your platoon in the mountains of Italy.

D: Well, I remember on graduation at Fort Benning which they called Benning School for Boys, and ninety day wonders because in ninety days you could become a second lieutenant, and I remember going home, my dress uniform on, and feeling, you know, kind of proud of myself that I had made it. And I knew my parents would be pleased, as they were. And my brother who later served in New Guinea. But you know, you got-- trying to remember whether we had two weeks or three weeks leave to go home and you know, meet your friends and-- just sort of a vacation, a chance to spend some time with your parents and my sisters. My brother was already gone in uniform. But the first thing I knew we were getting orders to ship out. I mean, you know, before all this started, before Fort Benning, they had a special program called ASTP, army specialized training program, and they were gonna make engineers out of all of us fairly bright young men. And I thought it was a great idea. It was at Brooklyn College, and I became the company commander of all the students. But a funny thing happened. They decided about four months into the program they needed second lieutenants infantry on the battlefield more than they needed somebody going to school to be an engineer. That was sort of a prelude to Fort Benning and all the other things that happened. But I think I left from Fort Meade, and I remember I didn't get sick on the boat but it was not what I'd recommend for anyone. But you make a lot of friends, and of course you forget their names after seventy years. I remember Frank Carafa who pulled me out of danger after I'd been hit by German, I don't know, rocket or gunfire. My radio man had been shot and I felt it was my duty as

the leader to go out and pull him back into this little ravine for his protection, and I reached him okay, but about that time I felt a sting in my right shoulder. And I remember Frank Carafa pulled me by the right arm, which was a mistake, but he didn't know. He just tried to get me into a safe place. And as it turned out our radioman died within the next five or ten minutes. Then I was left there for about eight hours as I remember it. Some of my platoon stayed with me but they had to catch up with the division, which was pushing the Germans out of Italy. And so I had some company for a while. And you know they give you morphine for pain, and I couldn't move my arms or legs. So they put a big "M" on my forehead in my blood so that somebody else wouldn't come along and give me more morphine, which could be fatal. And I remember lying there for what I thought was forever, but it was about six to eight hours before—there were so many wounded that day and so many killed in my division, the 10th Mountain Division, the medics were working as hard as they could. And it took so long to get to me and several others I'm certain. And we were taken to a field hospital, and then I was, I think, on the next morning, I was sent to a better hospital in Pistoia, Italy. And then there I stayed-- they had a halter on my neck because my spinal cord had been bruised and my shoulder pretty well shot, so I didn't have, still don't have, good sensory perception in my left hand, and I don't use my right. But, you know, it changes your life in a second. You could be a healthy twenty-one or twenty year old second lieutenant who thought he was quite an athlete, and then for the rest of your life you rely on other people for help. And it's not easy becoming dependent when you've been on your own for all your life. And so I thought, "well this isn't gonna last. You know, I'll be in the hospital for a few days and then--" But it didn't turn out that way. I was in the hospital for years, and I lost a kidney, and couldn't walk for about a year, and I couldn't feed myself. It was over a year. It could have been sooner. But the nurses were so nice. I kept saying, "I can't do it today. Maybe tomorrow." So they kept coming, these beautiful nurses. And it was kind of a break in the day to have someone feed you something you didn't like just so you could visit with them. But I got to be a pretty well-known creature around the hospital, which was Percy Jones Hospital in Battle Creek, Michigan, because I was there a long time, and one of the men I met was to become a medal of honor winner and a United States Senator from Hawaii, Dan Inouye, and we be--he was wounded a week after I was about a mile from where I was wounded, and we became fast friends. And he was a great bridge player. I didn't play, but he was the best. I think he weighed ninety-three pounds at the time. But-- and then I-- you know, I had a pretty good sense of humor so they used to roll me around in the evening. The guys were just flat on their back, couldn't even get in a wheel chair, and I would visit, and if the occasion was right we'd laugh and maybe even cry, but at least you had a chance to do something for your fellow soldier. And we had a fellow from Chicago, Joe Bartlett, who couldn't move a muscle and he had bedsores. And in those days they used what they called a striker frame, and they'd turn him every hour so he wouldn't get these sores. But he, you know, his whole back and bottom were just massive bedsores. But I never saw a more personable and likeable person than Joe. And we spent a lot of time together, and he knew he wasn't gonna ever be able to walk. But he accepted it. And the real story is you have to take what you have left and make the most of it. This is what Dr. Kelikian who operated at the old Wesley Hospital in Chicago, and Armenian who loved veterans-- he'd been in the service himself as a major-- and who operated on me six times and never let me pay him. My mother came to visit one time. And said, "Oh you have--" what kind of veins--

"varicose veins. I fix it." And he did fix it. And my parents didn't have a lot of money, but they wanted to pay him, and he said, "No, you don't worry about it. I'll get it from the rich patients." And the Touhys were very prominent in Chicago in those days. I think some were involved in criminal activities. But they were patients of his, and he said, "I'll get it from people like that." So that was an experience that I'll never forget. And he did this while I was a patient at the hospital at Percy Jones. And in our ward was a fellow named Phil Hart who had been the Lieutenant Governor of Michigan and later became a United States senator, and one of the three senate office buildings is named the Hart Office Building because this wonderful guy--and we were in different parties--never said an unkind word about anyone. Never. He was the conscience of the senate. And I remember coming to see him before I got into politics, and we had a good visit. So you meet those kind of people. You meet wonderful people. I'm not talking necessarily rich people, just middle class Americans who in the case of the military have done their duty, they've done what they were asked to do, some never came home, some came home with serious wounds, and others with wounds that aren't quite so serious. But-- and my hero was Eisenhower. Even though I was part of Ike's army and even though I got screwed up, my life changed under Ike, I-- he was still the man who'd liberated millions in Europe and ended the war in Korea and was a great president for eight years. So we all had our heroes in those days, and Ike was right at the top. And Omar Bradley and--

C: That's who my grandfather talked about. Bradley was his favorite.

D: Yeah. I remember sitting up in the senate gallery listening to the debate when the defense bill came up.

C: I read in your book that when you assumed command of the platoon you stayed out of the command tent as much as humanly possible. And the story that you write is actually the story that many people tell about that young, green second lieutenant who goes into a seasoned company or platoon or squad, and everybody's kind of looking at you and rolling their eyes and saying, "Oh, yeah, look at this guy. He's not gonna be with us long."

D: Yeah.

C: Will you tell me a little bit about your experience and gaining the trust of your men?

D: Well, as you indicated, when I arrived I knew most every one of my platoon knew a lot more about what was going on than I did because there had been a battle before I arrived taking Mount Belvedere which is an important-- well, very important to take that mountain. And I was not in--well, I was still in the replacement depot waiting to be assigned. So you kind of feel like, jiminy, what am I doing here with my first sergeant who battle worn and tested, and I'm just out of Fort Benning, and we're told what to expect but, you know, you never-- in war you never know what to expect. I felt kind of intimidated. Gee, maybe I ought to be the first sergeant and he ought to be the second lieutenant. Or maybe I just thought it'd be way down the line. So I got acquainted with my people in my platoon. You have to build a friendship, I don't care what you do, and establish a trust. So I think they got the feel of, "Well, this guy's not so bad. You know, we

can trust him. We can follow him even though it might mean the end." and you know, second lieutenants were expendable. There were three in my regiment who were killed on Mount Belvedere so three of us greenhorns were replacements. And I don't mean to denigrate what all us young guys did, but I think we all recognized, you know, we're gonna be tested, and they're gonna see if you are for real and understand their life and where they're from and what they've done and praise them for the victory. And so I got pretty well acquainted. In fact I kept track of Ollie Manninen and Frank Carafa and, let's see, there's another one or two. They've all passed now, but I went up to visit them. There was some little dispute on who saved my life, whether it was Frank or Ollie. And I think the doctor saved my life, but they made it possible. And I don't know which. I know Frank Carafa did pull me partly in because of my arm, but they were just great guys, and typical Americans. You know, no elitist in the group, just all working guys.

- C: What did you talk about with them to gain their trust? It seems like one of the hardest tasks that I've read about in any military history is the exact thing that you did. You gained their trust. Talk about their families? Did you joke around with them...
- D: Talk about families, you sat around-- you never acted like you were in a hurry-- I can't stay but a couple minutes but I want to come by and see you. You know, you had to give some of your time. When you're just sitting around waiting for something to happen it's not a time for the leader to take a nap. It's time for the leader to go around and see who else is taking a nap, and the one's who aren't you stop to visit with and learn about his family and learn about what he did before he got in the service and learn about what he hopes to do when he leaves the service. Because everybody's an optimist. No one really believes they're ever gonna be killed, and I think that day the 10th Mountain lost nine hundred-and-something killed. Now that's a terrible day. So, but then they pushed on, drove the Germans out of Italy, the war ended two weeks after I was wounded. And everyone knows the story; we were supposed to start our push on the twelfth of April '45 but Roosevelt, our president, our leader passed away, so we were all young kids and we were in no shape to take off that day, so they decided to go on the fourteenth.
- C: So they gave you a day to basically mourn the president.
- D: Yeah, right. And, you know, we weren't democrats, republicans. You know, we weren't-- may have been one or two misguided ones in the group, but most of us were neutral on politics. But we knew FDR was our president. We knew he was our real commander, and, you know, we shed some tears even though we never met him and probably never had that opportunity.
- C: You were, as you were getting ready for, I think it was, operation craft man-- was that the operation that you were getting ready to do? You wrote about the bombardment from the German 88s. That's another thing that is referenced in a lot of military histories is the--how that wears on the men in the foxholes and in the ditches and what that does to your psyche.

D: Well, particularly where the enemy has the high ground. And they'd been out during an 88 bombardment on April fourteen. They were up on the high ground with the hedgerow, and we were trying to take it. And that's what became so dangerous. And we tried everything. I don't know if they gave us any air cover that day. I don't think so. But artillery and grenades wouldn't do much, might kill someone, but we had the guts-- now, I was already wounded, but the survivors had the guts to take that hill, and that was a key. After they'd done that it was sort of a cakewalk getting through Italy. But, you know, obviously when something changes your life it takes a while to get over. And I'm certain people are portrayed in the museum, whatever conflict they may have been in, it's the same. You know, something just suddenly changes your life, you-- I don't know if the word depressed is too much, but you get-- you're pretty down when somebody tells you you're not gonna be able to use your right arm and you're not gonna have perception in your left hand and you're gonna lose a kidney. And you know it all kind of gets the best of you for a period of time, and then you finally recognize, as I said earlier, Dr. Kelikian told me, "You've got to make the most of what you have left." And you have to have a positive attitude.

C: Is that what did it for you? Is that the thing that-- or was it a combination of things? Family, friends --

D: A combination, but this Dr. Kelikian, great Armenian—I stayed in their house when he was doing all this surgery, and I couldn't go home or go somewhere. I'd stay with them. They were like a second family. So when he says, you know-- he always called me "captain" even though I wasn't a captain at the time-- "You know, don't worry. You're gonna be alright. You're gonna amount to something." He was always very positive, and he never said, you know, you're not gonna be able to do this or that. He just left that off the table. So when someone like that who's cared for you, operated on you, operated on your mother, wouldn't take any money, you listen to that person. I mean this is a real man. He's trying to help me, and he did. Finally I started, you know, thinking of other things. And I was able to walk. And then as I said I was kind of able to entertain. But I had a blood clot in my lung. And Dr. Solomon from San Francisco—I think I was the first patient to receive Streptomycin and also another anti coagulant; I can't remember the name of it. But he was a wonderful doctor, and he kept that clot from reaching the fatal places. And finally it was dissolved, I don't know how, but I was on the critical list for months. And every day they would come in and take my prothrombin level, I guess to see how your blood is coagulated. And as long as it was sort of normal you're out of danger but-- so I don't know. I had a lot of things happen to me, but, you know, I always—I think that's when I really believed there was a higher power, too, looking after me. And my favorite song is "You'll never walk alone," because I think he's walking with me. So I've been doing well. Ninety-three going on a hundred. I got out to the WWII memorial, been doing it for five years greeting WWII vets, Korean vets.

C: What do you guys talk about?

D: We chat, and we tell lies to each other. There's nobody around to prove it. So we can say, "Oh, yeah, there I was machine gun, all these guys coming at me, and I got 'em all." You know, they don't really do that but-- well, we talk about what service we were in. We always ask each other how old we are and are you in

good health. And we talk about their family. And they all come with a guardian, it doesn't cost the veteran anything, and we get a lot from Chicago. But you know, it's their son or their daughter's a guardian or maybe a neighbor. Firemen do a lot of it too. And when they arrive at Reagan Airport there are always people there to line up and clap, and there's always an American flag, and then they get a police escort into the memorial. And they love driving by these bureaucrats. They think that's the greatest thing since sliced bread to get right through right to the memorial. But it's very emotional. You know, these are guys now ninety, ninety-two, ninety-three, ninety-seven, and now the Korean veterans are only about six years younger, and Vietnam are maybe twelve, and they go to all the memorials but they start with the WWI so the old guys get to go first. And you can imagine all the pent-up feelings these men have. They probably never talked to anybody including their wife about what really happened. And there was a lot of tears shed, a lot of Kleenex, when they first arrive and walk into this beautiful, privately funded memorial, it's a tough, tough thing for them to do. But then they, you know, they get on with it and have a prayer service and a little flag service, and they all take pictures by their pillar, whether it's Kansas or Illinois or wherever. And I'll be there Saturday. All of us. You'll be--

- C: Way back in Chicago. Well, I have a question. My-- it's related to my own family's history. But my grandfather served in WWII. He was with the 401st Fighter Squadron. Army Air Corps. He was an ordnance specialist back before Hurt Locker. You know, they didn't have those outfits. And he always told the story about the day after VE day and a pilot had a malfunction and was killed, and it brought the entire unit down. And nobody really understood what that meant. And he never really talked a whole lot about his service, but all the guys didn't come home from the P-38s when they were out there and, you know, doing their bombings and fighting over Germany. What would you say to a veteran-- to a WWII veteran or a Vietnam veteran or a, you know, Iraq, Afghanistan, whatever-- to get them to think about sharing their story about what they did? When they're ready, of course.
- D: Well, I find particularly they get a little older, they're more willing to tell their sons and family and maybe close friends. I don't know—I can't remember, when I was younger I didn't need to talk about it. It was pretty obvious something happened to me. But I still didn't sit around and say this, this, and too bad or whatever. I don't know what the reluctance is. There are several groups as you know including the Library of Congress who are doing these life stories for preservation, and I don't know what they'd be used for twenty, thirty years from now. I just hope there are no more veterans, you know, after we get out of the mess in Iraq and Syria and Afghanistan, Crimea, and Ukraine, North Korea. I mean it-- there are all kinds of dangers lurking out there that one false move by the Iranians or Putin, it all could bring on another conflict. And we're not really prepared. I mean our ships and airplanes and-- we need to bring them up to date. Had nothing to do with what we were talking about.
- C: It kind of has everything to do with it. I've never met a soldier in my work with the museum and library-- airman, seaman, marine-- who says that, "Hey, let's go to war." Every single one I've talked to says war is the worst thing you can do. It's got to be the last resort. How do we make sure that we don't have war? I'm not

sure that's the perception people have of the military, but it's what everybody says who's in the military. What are your thoughts on that?

D: Well, if you're outside the military and safe and know you're not gonna be called, I think you might be a little more likely of saying, "Let's take 'em out. Let's wipe out Isis," or whatever. And that may become necessary regardless of what people think or people in the military think. If they keep infiltrating into America and murdering innocent Americans, if they ever do it in a large scale, you know, we're gonna have to move. And again young men and women now are gonna have the responsibility of quelling whatever's going on. You know, war isn't fun, and people toss it around like, "Oh, yeah, well, nothing to this, nothing to that," probably haven't seen much action. You've got parents who don't want their sons and daughters involved. You've got parents who served in Korea or Vietnam or WWII, and they-- you know, there are some people, quite a few, in that group who probably have a slightly different view on, "Let's go get 'em. Let's take 'em out." I get that a lot on a Saturday from these older guys. Of course, we're not going. So they say, "Yeah, let's go. We'll get 'em." We can't even make it to the recruiting office. You know, what are we gonna do?

C: Your sergeant in your platoon--

D: Frank Carafa.

C: Yeah, what do you remember the most about him? Who he was as a man.

D: Well, he was certainly a man who cared about me, and I know he cared about other members of his platoon because we kept in touch for, oh, I don't know how many years. He passed away I think two years ago. And I think a year before that I'd gone up to see him. And he was just a working class proud American. He was a very proud veteran, proud of his service. He's that kind of guy, you know, and as we said earlier, kind of intimidated when you walk in as a green horn. But he was the most knowledgeable person in the platoon. And the fact that he continued to reach out to me made me feel good because I think he did trust me. So-- and that's important. If people don't trust you, you can't win. I don't care what, military, private.

C: That's the beginning and the end of the entire platoon is that trust, right?

D: Right. Well, you've got to rely on the guy next to you if you're going out and getting shot at. And you've got to not lead people into a trap. So, but sometimes you have to do things that you probably think somebody gave a bad order. But our general was General Hayes, and he's the one who decided that our regiment should go off the left flank and take the hedgerows. So we did, and that's what you do in the service. They tell you jump, you say, "How high?" But it was worth it. We live in the best country in the world. We got a lot of things we could do better, but so does every other country.

C: I only have one final question for you and then if there's anything else you'd like to add or thoughts--what do you think that you'd want--this is kind of a big question, but it can be very personal if you want it to be. What would you want--we're upon the WWI centennial, right? It's coming up, 2017 through '19, and the

country's getting ready to observe that hundred years. When WWII is a hundred years old, what do you think you would want the country at that point to know about you and the generation of guys that went and fought in Europe against, you know, the Nazis and the Japanese and the Axis powers?

- D: Well, we're the disappearing generation, the WWII. We've gone from 16.5 million to around 700,000. So we're losing five, six hundred a day. We're trying to-- I'm the chairman to raise money for an Eisenhower memorial. It's hard to believe that after seventy-one years there's not a monument to Ike in our nation's capital. And so we're working away at that, but some of us want to be there for the dedication of the Eisen-- you know, he's our hero. And it takes three years to build it. And then you have to argue with congress. They're supposed to pay for part of it, part of it we raise from groups like the McCormick Foundation. Little plug in there. But, I don't know, when I die I just want to put on my tombstone, "Veteran". That would say it all.
- C: Amen to that. I want to thank you for sitting down with me today. We'll do good work with this.